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ABSTRACT

Seeking to determine the necessary elements of a grammar for undergraduate students with a strong interest in Old French, the author discusses: (1) sounds, (2) forms, (3) syntax, and (4) poetics. It is felt that the treatment accorded phonology should be different from the traditional approach used in graduate level grammars, since the course is to be oriented primarily toward the reading of introductory literature. Specific texts are mentioned, and a general course description is provided. (RL)

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A GRAMMAR FOR UNDERGRADUATE OLD FRENCH

In order to teach Old French to undergraduates it will be necessary to decide on what sort of grammar to use. And by grammar I mean a text giving a clear and adequate introduction to Old French sounds, forms, and syntax for beginning students to use in acquiring an elementary reading knowledge of the language. It would, in short, be a handbook. Since this paper does not pretend to be anything more than a statement of what I think such a grammar should be like, I should like to begin by making a few general assumptions regarding the type of students and material I think such a course would require. These assumptions will, I hope, provide a context within which I can propose a grammar that is suitable for beginning students and that can be used with the material generally available for instruction.

To begin with then, I believe one must assume that only outstanding advanced undergraduates will be admitted into a course in Old French. These students should possess a good undergraduate preparation in French language and literature; this means they should have had at least three years of college French. Furthermore they would presumably be planning to continue Old French in graduate school, either as candidates for advanced degrees in Old French or Romance languages, or in areas of English, comparative literature, or history where several years of work in Old French is necessary for their specialty. I do not believe this is assuming too much regarding the plans or preparation of good seniors.

Second, I assume that the grammar will not be a complete or even advanced text — there are enough of these anyway in French, English, and German — but rather an elementary handbook to guide and help the beginning student of Old French as he tries to master the rudiments of the language and to acquire some fluency in reading. By way of comparison, it would not be dissimilar in form to Raynaud de Lage's Introduction à l'ancien français, except that the treatment of syntax should perhaps be more extensive than in his text.

Third, one must take for granted that a number of Old French works are available in editions suitable for beginning students.

Finally, I assume that the proposed undergraduate course will emphasize Old French literature rather than philology, in the narrow sense of the word; and by this I mean that the object of the course will be to teach the students to read and appreciate certain outstanding works of Old French literature, rather than to use those works primarily to study the evolution of the language from Latin to Old or Modern French. Since agreement on this point is important in determining the scope of any grammar prepared for undergraduate Old French, and since my limitation of the breadth of the course may seem to some ill-advised, I shall take a little time to justify my decision.

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The interest undergraduates may have in learning Old French is, I believe, mainly literary; in fact, undergraduates, not to speak of graduates, are often repulsed by the need to learn the development of a language that they can scarcely read. Beginners simply find it more interesting to ponder, for example, the place of the Baligant episode in the Roland or the conflict between love and knighthood in Yvain, than to study the rise and evolution of inchoative verbs in Vulgar Latin and Old French. I do not mean that the rise and development of inchoative verbs is not interesting; only that it is more interesting and more meaningful to a student when he already knows Old French and can easily recognize the verbs that stem from Latin inchoatives. This would apply as well to other aspects of the development of Old French. Later, of course, the student would undertake a more intensive and thorough study of the development of the language in a separate and more advanced graduate course.

The wishes of students can not of course be a deciding factor in determining how a subject is to be taught, and there are indeed more cogent reasons for setting up a beginning course in Old French along the lines I have described. But I think it is not wrong to call attention to the desires of the students (as I see them, of course) as long as other considerations seem to show that a beginning course should in fact answer their wishes.

For I see no reason why students can not learn to read the Roland or Chrétien's Yvain or the Jeu d'Adam without a knowledge of the evolution of Old French from Vulgar Latin, anymore than it is not impossible for them to read Molière, Voltaire, or Valéry without a knowledge of the development of Modern French. A knowledge of Modern French philology would of course improve their understanding of modern authors — on an advanced level. But we are hear speaking about learning to read Old French, that is about a level where it is very difficult for students to go into the finesses of a language, particularly a language as illusive as Old French or any other medieval language can often be.

The order I have described whereby a student learns to read Old French before he takes up the evolution of the language is not unusual. I believe it is customary in teaching Middle English to begin by making the students acquire a reading knowledge of the language by reading some important author, usually Chaucer. A more thorough study of the development of Middle English from Old English follows this preparation on an advanced level. I believe a similar pattern is followed in teaching Middle High German and Old German. For Old French we have Latin in place of Old English and Old German; and we assume that the students know Latin, or can be made in a short time to learn it well enough to be able to undertake a meaningful study of the development of Old French from Classical or Vulgar Latin. Unfortunately most students know or remember about as much Latin as English students know Old English; and their ignorance can not be corrected by one, two, or three weeks of "review". It is no wonder that discouragement and delay are the result of beginning one unknown language with a study of its development from a second unknown language. I think reversing the order so that students learn first

to read Old French and then how Old French developed from Latin would considerably improve the situation. For students who begin the study of the evolution of French would be more qualified to understand and appreciate its development if they already had a reading knowledge of both Old French and Modern French. One does not expect beginning language students to learn the history of the language at the same time they do first and second year French. It is general practice to give courses in the history of a language to advanced students who have already had two or three years of the language. The same should be true, mutatis mutandis, in teaching Old French.

It is obvious from the preceding discussion that we need a grammar giving not the evolution of sounds and forms, but rather a description of Old French as it existed from about the twelfth to the fifteenth century. With this in mind, I shall now go on to consider the treatment of sounds, forms, and syntax in such a grammar.

Old French phonology will not be treated extensively in the type of course I have described. It should therefore be enough to present in the grammar the Old French sounds, with perhaps a brief historical introduction emphasizing the important changes from the Roland to Villon and outstanding dialectical differences that might otherwise cause difficulty in reading texts from different regions of France. Such an introduction would not be unlike the introduction to standard Latin and Greek grammars intended for classroom reference.

The section on morphology will require more extensive and thorough treatment because a knowledge of forms is essential for correct reading. The student will have to know the principal declensions of Old French as they existed about 1100, and will need to have an explanation of the process of simplification due to analogy, levelling, changes in pronunciation, especially the silencing of important consonants like s; perhaps for orientation a brief historical introduction could clarify the over-all development of forms from Latin to Old French, by which the student could better orient himself in approaching the Old French forms. But even if there is such an introduction, emphasis should be placed on what will facilitate reading the texts. The student must be able to distinguish a nominative singular from an accusative plural in order to understand what he is reading, not in order to learn how the language evolved. The discussion should therefore emphasize difficulties that may arise in reading Old French if the forms are not understood. This of course applies not only to noun, pronoun, and adjective declension, but also to conjugation. In the presentation of the latter, the strong perfects and irregular verbs that develop by vocalic alternation as well as the levelling of irregular forms should be stressed.

Syntax will also need extensive treatment. It would probably be best to present the syntax in conjunction with the forms, as Raynaud de Lage does in his Introduction for French students, since Old French syntax and the changes that take place in it between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries are dependent to a considerable degree on morphological changes during that time. Thus the instructor

could pass easily from forms to syntax, and the differences between Old French and Modern French syntax could be seen to stem directly from the differences in forms. This is assuming, of course, as I do at the beginning of this paper, that the students have a satisfactory knowledge of Modern French grammar; thus the grammatical handbook can confine itself mainly to the differences, with only enough of the common traits of Old and Modern French to maintain continuity and clarity in the presentation.

The divisions I have suggested for an elementary grammar are rather obvious, given the limitations that I have assumed from the beginning of this paper. The difficulty comes in choosing what is to be included, and then arranging it coherently in the text. I can not go very extensively into this problem here, as it is too complicated and would require in effect a careful inspection of the available texts, and perhaps a few years of classroom experimentation with mimeographed forms before a final text could be put together. It is possible, however, to make a few suggestions here as to the format and presentation of the different sections of the grammar. Old French is neither Classical Latin nor Modern French; the language can be quite irregular, and standards often varied considerably; the differences from one period to another, one dialect, one genre to another can be very great. What texts will decide usage? What texts will decide what forms are "correct" or, at least, most common? To be comprehensive, the grammar would seemingly have to be longer and less elementary than was stipulated at the beginning of this paper.

I think that this problem solves itself. There are not many editions of important Old French works available that are suitable for elementary reading, and that can be found in texts that beginners can use. All editions presented in languages other than English and French must be rejected. Furthermore, almost all the editions in the Société des anciens textes français and the Classiques français du moyen âge suppose readers who are more advanced than beginners; they are critical editions, not textbooks. Other texts, such as appear in the Textes littéraires français — I am thinking in particular of Thomas' Tristan and Chrétien's Perceval — would probably be too difficult for beginning students, however worthwhile they might be for reading. There are however a few standard texts, such as Jenkins' Roland or the Blackwell series with Marie de France, for example, or perhaps even the Saint Alexis. The series to be edited by Mr. Nichols will provide enough representative works to build a decent elementary grammar around; it will include the Roland, Yvain, the first part of the Roman de la rose, three twelfth and thriteenth century plays, Villon's Grand Testament, and some representative poems of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. With these editions as examples, plus a few other standard beginning texts that might enjoy general approval (Ewert's Marie de France, Roques' Aucassin et Nicolette, Cluzel's edition of courtly lyric from the twelfth to the beginning of the thirteenth centuries), it should be possible to prepare a brief, yet satisfactory Old French grammar for an undergraduate course.

How should one integrate the grammatical instruction with the texts? I believe it would be best to devise a system of cross references, and prepare a set of exercises based on the texts (and grouped by texts, since one can not suppose that all the texts will be used in any one class). Several examples couled be cited directly from the text to illustrate particular forms and usage; in addition, a number of line references to the texts could be added in case the instructor or student needs additional material or illustration. In the exercises the student could be required to use the handbook as a guide to explain various passages in the texts. These passages would be omitted from the illustrative examples, and thus the student would have to show an understanding of the grammar in order to solve particular problems of reading and interpretation in the text. In this way, all the instruction would be based directly on written Old French, and would provide the student with the general information and active practice he needs in order to be able to read well. (I do not believe, however, that exercises requiring translation from English into Old French would be of much use, except as repetitive drill; the student needs to develop an ability to identify forms and to understand Old French construction rather than to adapt himself to an artificial standard of expression.)

I have covered the main parts of the traditional grammar; I should like to comment briefly before concluding on one addition that I should like to see in such an Old French grammar, or at least as a supplement or additional volume. Since the undergraduate course will emphasize reading knowledge and appreciation, and since there is a growing interest in literary studies of Old French works, I believe that we need an introduction to Old French poetics. A section on prosody is common in Latin and Greek grammars, and the instruction is just as important for Old French literature. I would propose the following plan for the section on poetics. There would first be a general outline of medieval theories of composition: the choice of matière — the source — and its arrangement. The rules of natural and artificial order could be explained in conjunction with the discussion of arrangement (Yvain for example illustrates artificial order very well), as well as the means of amplification and abbreviation, since the expansion or abbreviation of part of a work depends to a large extent on the author's original plan; both amplification and abbreviation play an important role in the composition of courtly monologues in verse romance and in the elaboration of the courtly chanson. The use of commonplaces could be introduced in connection with amplification, together with a sampling of the more common topoi of Old French literature that are found in the student texts (especially the commonplaces of courtly love). The different genres and forms, particularly those of courtly lyric, would come next. To be complete and cover all the texts proposed for the beginning course, there would have to be an explanation of the methods of oral or thematic composition used in the chansons de geste. In addition the common means of embellishment taught in medieval grammar, rhetoric,

and poetics must be explained and illustrated; this includes the rhetorical devices and their relation to the different types of styles, as these were understood in the Middle Ages (grand, middle, and low; difficult and simple). It would not be necessary to describe and illustrate all the rhetorical figures and tropes, but only those applicable to Old French and common in the texts used for the course. I know of no student texts covering all these subjects, except one or two in German, and the lack must be felt acutely by anyone who attempts a study of the style of Old French literature. Finally, there should also be an introduction to Old French versification, illustrating the ways in which varieties of effect are produced in very formal courtly lyric, as well as in such average lines as the octosyllabic couplet à rimes plates. All the instruction would be based on illustrations and exercises taken from the reading material, as in the grammar proper. Poetics is a difficult and often tedious subject to master; but, like grammar, it is essential to an appreciation of a literature as formal as that in Old French is wont to be.

I have described in this paper the type of grammar I believe would be most suitable for an undergraduate course in Old French; and I think I have proposed no revolutionary changes, except, perhaps, in relegating phonology to a secondary position it is not accustomed to occupying. There are the main divisions of standard student grammars: sounds, forms, and syntax, and, in addition, a section on poetics. The emphasis on different topics would be determined to a large extent by the standard beginning texts, and the illustrative material and exercises would come largely from them. It is hoped that such a grammar, combining language and poetics, would be helpful in preparing a relatively large number of students who would be able to begin serious work in Old French language and literature in their first year of graduate school.

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